

Discussion Guide

About the Book

Gregor hadn't planned to leave his home and literally fall into another world, or to tumble into an adventure, or to become a hero. It is true that he was unhappy. It is true too that he didn't have many friends, and that he was uncertain about who he was and where he belonged. Practical and responsible Gregor wasn't the kind of kid who would seek answers by running away, and he certainly didn't see himself as the one who could find his missing father and make his family whole again. But when he was entrusted to lead a quest in the Underland, he rose to the occasion.

Like many characters in the fantasy genre, and like many of the readers of fantasy, Gregor felt like an outsider in his environment. Furthermore, he was powerless to control or change things. It is not until he stepped out of his world that he began to unravel the mystery of who he was and what his place in society was.

As you read *Gregor the Overlander*, you'll feel yourself identifying with Gregor — putting yourself in his shoes. After you've read the novel, we hope this guide will help you think about the book, understand it in the context of other fantasies you may have read or seen, and discuss it with your friends or classmates.

Questions for Discussion Setting

1. Bartholomew of Sandwich and his followers believed that the surface of the earth would eventually lack the ability to sustain life, so he ventured into the Underland to create a new society. Discuss the similarities between the Underlanders and other historical or modern-day groups who seek to separate themselves from the mainstream of society. How does society view these groups? How do governments regard them? What do you think of such separatist organizations?
2. From the details and descriptions of the Underland, draw a map of Gregor's journey from his laundry room to the Underland and back again. Be sure to include Regalia; the lands of the crawlers, spinners, and gnawers; and the portals through which Gregor and Boots travel.
3. How have the inhabitants of the Underland adapted to their environment? What would happen if any of them came to the surface?

Character

1. Do you think that, at the beginning of the story, Gregory has given up hope of ever finding his father? Once his adventures in the Underland get under way, do you think he believes he'll find his father?
2. The Underlanders see Gregor as the great warrior told of in the Prophecy of Gray, and because of that he is to lead the quest to prevent their annihilation. But Gregor sees himself differently — he says to Vikus, "You've got the wrong guy. Really, I promise you, I'm not the warrior." Explain his feelings. Why is Vikus so convinced that Gregor is the right one?

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3. How is Gregor like many soldiers who go off to war? Gregor has many qualities that we associate with the typical American hero. What are they? How are these traits different from than those of Luxa and Henry?
4. Discuss Gregor's personality. Of all his character traits, which do you find most admirable? By his own admission he has very few friends. Could he be your friend? Why?
5. How does Gregor's relationship with Luxa change over the course of the novel?
6. Both Luxa and Henry have an air of superiority about them. How does this translate into the way they treat Gregor and into their attitudes toward the other inhabitants of the Underland?
7. One of the most interesting characters in the novel is not a human, but a rat that Vikus has enlisted to be the guide for the questers. Discuss Ripred's traits that set him apart from the others, both rats and humans.

Plot

1. Giant cockroaches, rats, and bats inhabit the Underland. Gregor is scared but keeps his cool. How and why do you think he does it, and why is it important to him that he appear brave? How would you react if you were staring down into the face of a four-foot cockroach?
2. Although he acts to the contrary, it appears that Vikus knows who Gregor is from the time Gregor arrives. Why doesn't he tell Gregor from the very start? What does Vikus say that suggests he was testing Gregor to see if he was worthy of leading the quest? Discuss the possibility that Vikus intended to see if Gregor would try to escape from Regalia.
3. Vikus tells Gregor: "The journey will be difficult. The prophecy warns that four of the twelve will lose life. It may be wisest to leave Boots here." While it seems that Gregor's desire to bring his baby sister on the quest is foolish, she does play a crucial role as a quester. What is it?
4. Authors sometimes plant clues in a story to foreshadow future events. Often these clues can be very subtle and it's not easy to pick up on them. Look back in the story, and find things that Henry said and did that point to his treachery.
5. Before leaving for the quest, Gregor is brought to the Underland museum to choose things that might aid him on his journey. He selects a flashlight and batteries, a construction worker's hardhat with a light, and a can of root beer. What did you think he would do with these items? How in fact do these things come in handy? He could have taken a baseball. Why didn't he?
6. At the end of the book, when Gregor is saying his farewells, Luxa says to him, "Perhaps we shall see you here again, someday." Gregor does in fact return to the Underland in *Gregor and the Prophecy of Bane*, the second book in *The Underland Chronicles*. Talk about the circumstances you imagine bring him back. What do you think the Prophecy of Bane foretells?

Theme

1. The prophecies of Bartholomew of Sandwich foretold many things that have occurred in the Underland including the death of Luxa's parents. When prophecies are fulfilled, is it because of fate or because people shape their behavior to conform to the prophecy? Discuss the concept of self-fulfilling prophecies. Also discuss the belief in free will versus fate.
2. Despite the great perils, Gregor insists on taking Boots with him on the quest. He recalls what his mother once said to him, "Stay together." Do you think his mother would have wanted him to put Boots in that kind of danger? Discuss a time when you literally followed something your parents said and it got you into trouble in school or at home. Conversely, often young people

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don't follow their parents' directions because they feel those orders are outdated or boring. Talk about a time when you did what your parents told you and it paid off.

3. From the moment Gregor arrived in the Underland his goal was to get back home to his family. And in the end, when Gregor asks his father how he survived, his father responds, "I just never stopped believing I'd get home again." Much of literature is built around the theme of leaving home and finding your way back. What does home mean to Gregor and his father? What does it mean to the Underlanders? What does it mean to you?
4. Rats and Underlanders were not always bitter enemies. How is it that now they will fight to the death to eliminate each other? Does this surprise you? Think about recent events in world history, and discuss how the events and attitudes in the fictional society in *Gregor the Overlander* mirror the events and attitudes of real life.

Voice

1. Gregor, Luxa, Vikus, Solovet, Temp and Tick, Aurora and Ares, Gox, King Gorger, and Ripred – from what each of these characters say and do, imagine their voices. Then cast the actors who might play them in an animated feature film of *Gregor the Overlander*.
2. "Good late day," said Vikus, nodding to the Underlanders. "Meet you Gregor and Boots the Overlanders, brother and sister, who have most recently fallen among us."

The characters in the Underland speak in a very stylized, somewhat old-fashioned way. How does this help define who they are? Why doesn't Ripred talk this way?

Talking About the Fantasy Genre

Quests

1. Quest is a recurring theme in the fantasy adventure genre. You might argue that there are two quests in *Gregor the Overlander*. One is that of the Underlanders to fulfill the Prophecy of Gray and thus prevent their annihilation by the rats. The other is Gregor's quest to find his father and bring him home. How are the two quests interrelated? Why can one not exist without the other?
2. Discuss the similarities and differences between Gregor's quest in *Gregor the Overlander* and that of Frodo in *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien, Meg in *A Wrinkle in Time* by Madeleine L'Engle, Taran in the *Pyrddain Chronicles* by Lloyd Alexander, and other heroes in fantasy adventure novels.
3. In many fantasy stories, the main character doesn't plan to go on a quest, but is forced to do so by circumstances, and then rises to the occasion. Discuss the theme of the "reluctant hero" in many fantasies. Why is this an appealing idea?

Setting

1. The world in a fantasy novel is defined by its own very detailed set of natural and creature laws. Hogwarts, Harry Potter's school, is a school like no other. Alagaesia, the land of Christopher Paolini's *Eragon*, has not only its own geography, but also its own language. Even Mr. Arable's farm in *Charlotte's Web*, which appears to be so ordinary, has some very extraordinary

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happenings going on among the animals. Compare and contrast the Underland with these fantastic places and with the real world.

2. Gregor, like Alice (in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, by Lewis Carroll); Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy (in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* by C.S. Lewis); and Dorothy (in *The Wizard of Oz* by L. Frank Baum), travels through a passageway from "the real world" to a fantastic one. Discuss the variety of ways characters find their way into fantasy worlds in these and other novels you have read.